

# Round 2 Regional Meeting Summary December 2023

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OKLAHOMA  
Water Resources Board



US Army Corps  
of Engineers®



## SECTION 1 ROUND 2 REGIONAL MEETING EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2023, the Oklahoma Water Resources Board (OWRB) hosted the second in a series of regional meetings across the state to engage with local officials, water utility suppliers, regulated industry, commercial agricultural producers, economic development entities, and other organizations to converse on local water challenges share opportunities and identify ways the Oklahoma Comprehensive Water Plan (OCWP) can support local water planning and management.

The meetings began with a welcome by [Owen Mills, OWRB's Planning Director](#), and a local success story. The OCWP team extends another big thank you to the City of Enid, Oklahoma Rural Water Association, Choctaw Nation, Cherokee Nation, and City of Edmond for sharing their success stories! The OCWP team provided an update on water demand projections, physical supply evaluation, legal supply evaluation, and water quality assessment. Public water system participants were encouraged to submit their [Local Projects and Programs](#) (or capital improvement projects) as this data will be used as the foundation of estimating costs to meet future water needs across the state. All participants were encouraged to complete and invite their friends and colleagues to complete the [Public Outreach Survey](#), which allows you to share your priorities, concerns, and how the OCWP can provide value to you.

In August 2023, OWRB held the first round of regional meetings. During the first round of regional meetings, three categories emerged to frame breakout group discussions at the second round of meetings in December. While the conversations and suggestions varied across the regions, the following summary captures some broad takeaways and discussion items that were supported by many participants.

[Permitting / Policy / Regulations](#). Many participants expressed support for increasing timely enforcement of existing rules and use limits. Ideas for achieving this included establishing regional OWRB offices or representatives, local management authorities, or modifying enforcement rules.

Nearly all participants expressed views that some form of local control or management of water resources would be beneficial, although there was no consensus on what management structures should be implemented or what kinds of authorities, if any, should be established.

[Funding / Financing](#) and Infrastructure Improvements. There was broad support regarding the development of a more robust education program for system management and board training, expanded planning and technical assistance programs, and providing significant and permanent state funding for water and wastewater management. Most agreed that these could be accomplished within existing program authorities if these programs were provided additional funding and/or staff.

[Collaboration / Partnership](#). Many participants expressed support for developing regional water plans, and for the role coordination can play to leverage and improve individual plans within a region. Participants noted that regional water plans can be useful tools in identifying capital project needs for water supply, and that the state could help incentivize regional planning through financial programs to assist with funding regional plan development and by either requiring, or providing bonus points for, inclusion of a capital project in a regional water plan as a condition for approving or prioritizing state funding for that capital project.

Participants identified several best management practices (BMP) for managing water and mechanisms through which the state can encourage or incentivize these voluntary BMPs. Examples include providing training and/or technical assistance for utilities to implement effective utility management and sustainable utilities practices (e.g., appropriate rate structures, regular rate increases, long-term planning, etc.).

Subscribe to the [OCWP Newsletter](#) for updates on the project and to learn about upcoming meetings.

## SECTION 2 ROUND 2 REGIONAL MEETINGS

In December 2023, OWRB hosted in-person meetings in Goodwell, Lawton, Talihina, Tahlequah, and Oklahoma City, plus a statewide virtual meeting, as part of the ongoing project to update the OCWP. This was the second in a series of meetings designed to engage with local officials, water utility suppliers, regulated industry, commercial agricultural producers, economic development entities, and other organizations to converse on local water challenges, opportunities, and information the OCWP can provide to support their needs and efforts.

### 2.1 Welcome

Owen Mills, OWRB's Planning Director, welcomed guests by reminding them of the goals for the regional meetings, reviewing the agenda, and introducing key OCWP team members as well as legislators, local officials, and OWRB Board Members.

Public water system participants were encouraged to submit their [Local Projects and Programs](#) (or capital improvement projects) as this data will be used as the foundation of estimating costs to meet future water needs across the state. So far, only about 16% of systems have responded. Using the information they provided, along with data collected from the unfunded American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) request list, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) survey requests, and other sources, the total *reported* water and wastewater needs are \$15.8 billion, a vast majority of these needs are projects needed within the next 5 years. We know that the real needs are much larger than this so please continue to submit your information to us.

All participants were encouraged to complete and invite friends and colleagues to complete the [Public Outreach Survey](#), which allows you to share your priorities, concerns, and how the OCWP can provide value to you.

In each of the regions, a local success story was told.

- [Murali Katta, City of Enid](#), Director of Engineering, shared the history and ongoing work for the Kaw Lake Pipeline. The pipeline, along with expanding the well field, is anticipated to provide enough water to meet Enid's projected demands of 10.5 million gallons per day (mgd).
- [Charlene Westmoland, Oklahoma Rural Water Association](#), Source Water Specialist, shared about Bridgeport's groundwater well protection project, which improved access, corrected the drainage around the wellhead, and enlarged and secured the perimeter around the well.
- [Ahndria Ablett, Choctaw Nation](#), Director of Water Resources, shared a success story at Sardis Lake Water Authority. With technical support from the nation and funding support from the nation and OWRB, Sardis Lake Water Authority was able to improve their treatment and distribution system allowing them to fulfill their commitment to provide clean, safe water for all their residents.
- [Shella Bowlin, Cherokee Nation](#), Secretary of State, welcomed guests and talked about the Nation's ongoing water planning and sustainable utility activities. One specific highlight is the work that the nation is doing as part of Mankiller-Soap Water Act, which allocates \$2 million each year to eliminate barriers to clean water access across the reservation.
- [Jennifer Boaz, City of Edmond](#), Utility Program Specialist, discussed the City's ongoing outreach and water conservation efforts. Edmond has implemented permanent odd/even outdoor watering, is intentional in digital outreach and providing tours, and is in the process of implementing a Smart Meter program which will provide customers with real time water use information.

## 2.2 OCWP Update

The OCWP is a multi-year project that seeks to define and address water supply challenges and solutions. In recognition of the variability across the state, we complete our analysis at the basin or regional level. We seek input from stakeholders across all water sectors to support technical and policy work.

The OCWP seeks to provide consistent information across the state to assess reliable water supply, which depends on physical supply (*is wet water available*), legal availability (*do I have the water right to use the water*), and water quality. All of this depends on infrastructure (*do I have infrastructure in place to access, treat, and distribute or use the water?*).

**Water demand projections** are being developed for public supply, self-supplied domestic, crop irrigation, thermoelectric power, self-supplied industrial, livestock, and oil and gas sectors. We use the best available data to develop projections for each of the water use sectors.

**"Physical supply"** looks at the wet water available to meet demands. We utilize OWRB's newly updated H<sub>2</sub>O Tool to compare physical supply with demands. We have monthly streamflow data for seven decades in each of the 82 basins. When we look at demands, we also want to think about the monthly demand pattern of the water uses in that basin, recognizing that there may be months when, for example, demands are high and supplies run low. We project out monthly demands over 50 years, so we have a long-term perspective on where things are headed. But we do not stop there, we know that future streamflows might vary from the historical record, so we look at potential weather variability and weather extremes to understand how that supply picture might change in the future. When you put all that together in the H<sub>2</sub>O Tool, it allows us to anticipate future surface water shortages that will be driven in large part by drought and hydrologic variability. We will use this to determine the magnitude, frequency, and duration of the shortage and is important in characterizing the severity of the impact to water users.

In addition to looking at whether wet water is available, we need to assess whether we have the **legal right** to use the water. Using OWRB's surface water runoff model, we look at whether the stream/lake is fully allocated. For groundwater, we evaluate whether additional lands are available to dedicate over each aquifer. These analyses look at current and future conditions and are helpful in answering the questions of whether nearby sources are available to use.

We also evaluate current **water quality** conditions and trends and aim to present that in a way that is meaningful to users. We are seeking to answer the question, is the water of suitable quality to meet users' needs? For example, in lakes and reservoirs, we may show historical and trending information for parameters like chlorophyll a, turbidity, Secchi depth, conductivity, total nitrogen, total phosphorus, and temperature. We recognize that we have less data on groundwater quality (but are collecting more thanks to the Groundwater Monitoring and Assessment Program (GMAP) implemented as part of the previous OCWP recommendations), but we are planning to show the data we have like iron, manganese, nitrate, conductivity, and arsenic.

How do we bring it together? By looking at demand projections through the lens of wet water, legal water, and water quality, we have an opportunity to look at where we can anticipate the most significant water issues in the state as we look to the future. In each of the 82 basins, we will assess the potential effectiveness of a range of **water management strategies**.

To help define the infrastructure needs, the OCWP team has been collecting data from Public Water System participants were encouraged to submit their [Local Projects and Programs](#) (or capital improvement projects) as this data will be used as the foundation of estimating costs to meet future water needs across the state.

## 2.3 Round 1 Regional Meeting Recap

In August 2023, OWRB held five in-person and two virtual meetings around the state. Figure 1 summarizes the topics that came up during these discussions. The bigger the box, the more frequently the topic was brought up. Across the state, the top three topics were infrastructure improvements and funding/financing, permitting/regulations/policy, and collaboration/partnership. These topics were discussed in separate breakout sessions in the December 2023 meetings.

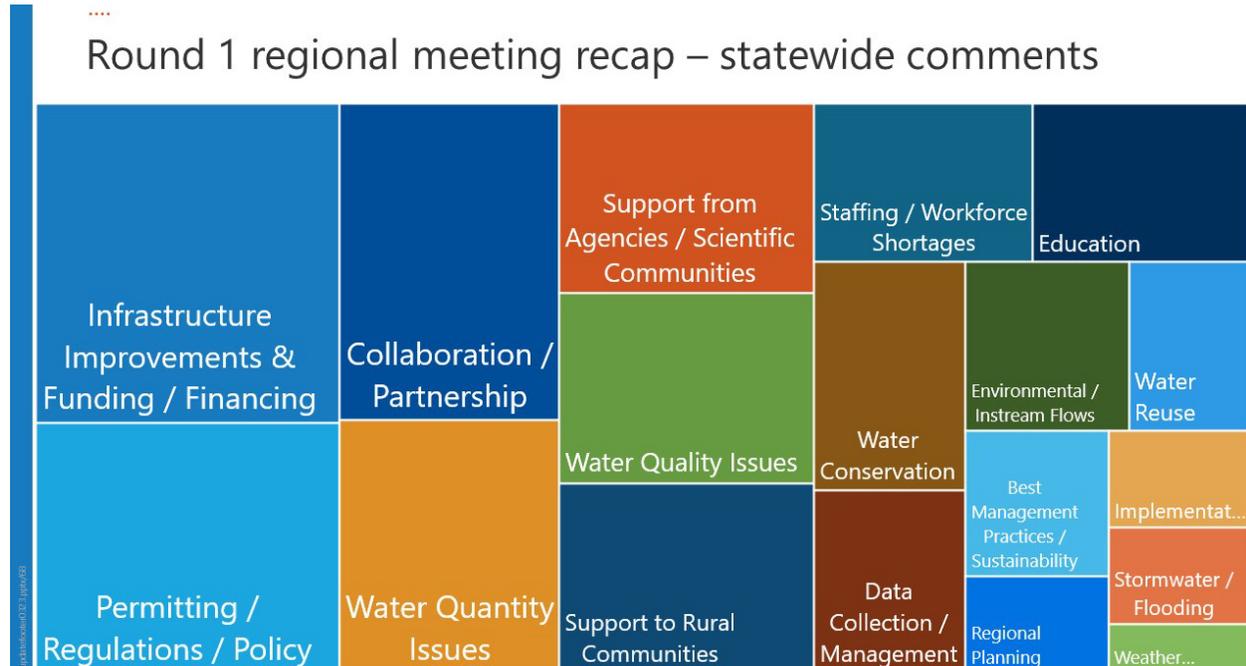


Figure 1 Round 1 Regional Meeting Recap

### **Examples of comments received regarding the Permitting/Regulations/Policy topic during Round 1 meetings were:**

- Water use metering and/or more broadly reporting and accuracy.
- Flexible regulations that adapt to changing technologies and conditions.
- Recognizing the connection of surface water and groundwater when permitting.
- Enforcement of existing rules.
- Coordination between agencies/groups to eliminate or reduce the number of unidentified wells.
- Better coordination between agencies on granting water permits. For example, offer an avenue to provide comments on a permit application other than by submitting an official protest.
- Well spacing, property line set-back, noncontiguous land dedication.

### **Examples of comments received on Infrastructure Improvements and Funding/Financing topic were:**

- Concern about how to pay for upgrades to meet current and future regulations.
- Improve access to and/or knowledge of funding opportunities, especially in small communities.
- Difficulty in raising water rates – need help to educate the public and boards about the true cost of water.

- How do we get more money to producers for infrastructure to improve water efficiency?
- Outreach emphasizing the Connection between water and economic development/vitality of communities.
- Difficulty for utilities, specifically small ones, to provide matching funds for existing programs.

**Examples of comments received on the Collaboration and Partnership topic were:**

- Informal collaboration between water systems is already happening.
- Partnerships between state and tribal nations, economic development, private partners, and local communities would be beneficial to meeting long-term water goals.
- Partnerships between urban and rural areas and with all water users for bigger impact and region improvement.
- Would forming an irrigation district provide benefits?
- What support is available and/or needed to form an irrigation district or other local group?

With this background in place, breakout groups (or short discussions in the virtual meeting) were held.

## 2.4 Round 2 Breakout Groups

Ideas discussed in the *breakout groups* are presented below. There were some themes that appeared in multiple breakout groups and/or ideas that were presented. A few examples are:

- Provide permanent funding and resources to support the water industry for planning, technical assistance, enforcement, infrastructure projects, education, and outreach.
- Encourage and/or incentivize use of BMPs, which can improve the water sector without mandates.
- Develop regional planning or governance committees to offer several benefits, including local control or management of water resources, provide avenue for coordination of planning efforts and supply sources, and be useful tools in identifying capital project needs for water supply.

### 2.4.1 Permitting / Policy / Regulations

Generally, the participants in the Permitting and Policy breakout groups across the state expressed concerns over better management of water supplies to prepare for growth, address declining water tables, acknowledge groundwater and surface water interactions in rule making, and implement policies that protect the environment. Many expressed opinions that if the state agencies do not do a better job and get ahead of growth, the state could be heading toward significant trouble in the form of conflicts or severe environmental degradation.

On *setback buffers for wells* from property lines, some expressed that the current process and rules work well, while others expressed concerns such as disagreement among participants as to whether large wells impact other wells spaced nearby each other.

In terms of *metering*, participants expressed varying opinions on expanding mandatory metering in the state:

- Some participants expressed views that metering should be mandatory for all water use permits statewide with no exceptions.
- Others disagreed altogether with any form of mandate.
- Some thought metering should be mandatory for some uses, for uses above a certain threshold, mandatory in areas where there are high user conflicts, and/or mandatory in areas where surface and groundwater supplies are more fully allocated.

Participants who disagreed with mandatory metering cited reasons, such as intrusion on private property (assuming a government official would read meters), metering could result in reduction of groundwater allocations, there are other less expensive methods than meters (such as nozzle settings for irrigators or from remote sensing), and/or general concerns over government overreach. Participants who supported metering cited reasons, such as use in enforcing existing rules and use limits, resolving user conflicts, and better measurement and reporting of actual use. Some participants noted that if metering were to be legislatively required of users, then minimum thresholds could be established to avoid unintended economic consequences on small businesses or users (e.g., use over a certain annual volume must be metered), or that a state program to subsidize meter costs could be established to help offset costs and improve acceptability. Metering was noted by some as critical because it is foundational to many other initiatives and proper management, such as accurate estimates of water use and enforcement of permit limitations.

Related, the idea of a program for measuring water withdrawals and permitted usage via satellite imagery keying on local evapotranspiration was discussed. One participant noted that other states use remote sensing to validate permitted use each year. Some participants agreed that satellite imagery might be useful as a second layer of measurement or validation, while other participants thought such a program would not be useful for immediate resolution of user conflicts or might not be trusted and should not be considered over metering.

Of participants who spoke out, there was consensus that there should be more swift **enforcement of existing rules and use limits**. Given the limitation in OWRB staff and because OWRB does not have regional offices, immediate enforcement was acknowledged as difficult. Suggestion that regional offices could be established, or that local management authorities could be set up for enforcement.

Several participants mentioned that **surface water** users should not be penalized for not using their full permitted use (referring to the "use it or lose it" doctrine in the OWRB Rules. One participant suggested that OWRB look to Oregon for an example of a balanced approach to surface water permit holder framework. One participant noted that in areas where streams are more fully allocated, holding permits but not using them can hold up growth. However, permit holders should not lie or be wasteful just to keep a permit.

Nearly all participants expressed views that some form of **local control or management of water resources would be beneficial**, although there was no consensus on what management structures should be implemented nor what authorities, if any, should be established. At a minimum, participants agreed that water users of a **shared source** need better cooperation, information, and resource sharing.

One participant recommended the state establish aquifer planning commissions with specific regulatory authority, that of which would be no less stringent than state law allows. Another group suggested implementation of "Regional Water Governance Committees." This would be a local/regional committee with established rules for balanced representation of industry, community, economic growth, and the environment, for example. Some ideas on what the committee would do include review and comment on permit applications and establish a local system of checks and balances. The goal of such a management structure if established, would be to protect aquifer health and water supplies, and assure sustainable use. It was noted that the goal of sustainable groundwater use is not aligned with current state laws, which are designed with the intent for groundwater to be mined.

Generally, participants agreed that if there are minimum standards established by the State, a local management approach would make sense and would help with local buy-in, lessen potential or perceived region-to-region conflicts, and improve local cooperation and collaboration. These groups could potentially handle the enforcement of water use permit infractions. How to address and implement legislatively was acknowledged as difficult. Participants thought that rural water districts or county commissioners might be a good place to start those conversations. It was noted that regional planning groups would require oversight, especially if these groups were given authorities.

The topic of the State establishing *instream flow (ISF)* considerations within Oklahoma's water rights system was discussed. Some participants thought strongly that ISF should be established for all streams and rivers, while others were more cautious due to potential impacts to existing water users and the potential to overregulate permit holders. Some, but not all, agreed that if some type of ISF process were adopted, it should apply statewide so that piecemeal approaches do not emerge. One noted that there were too many stakeholders involved the last time the state legislature looked at ISF alternatives, suggesting that perhaps a more science led approach should prevail. One participant expressed concerns that the flow standards could create ever changing, moving targets.

In the meetings held in Northeast Oklahoma, a recommendation was made (and agreed upon by all participants) to expand and modernize the *water quality monitoring* network for both surface water and groundwater. An expanded water quality monitoring network should cover more areas of the state, have more sites, and should include an expanded list of constituents. The modernization should use the best available equipment, science, and technology. With this data, baseline levels for contaminants of concern should be established. Further, the Central Oklahoma participants agreed that water quality mandates must be enforced by the state, noting that with the adoption of alternative water supplies (such as reuse and aquifer storage and recovery) enforcement of rules are even more important.

Participants in Northeast Oklahoma recommended that industry permits related to water (both water and wastewater) be granted under a larger umbrella that pulls together approvals from OWRB, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ODAFF), and Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ). Participants thought industrial users should be required to submit environmental mitigation impact plans along with permits.

The groups discussed the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) proposal to review water use permits. Generally, there was no consensus among participants. Concerns were expressed that review of all permits could drastically slow the approval process, add too much additional regulation, or could lead to additional authoritative grabs. There were no concerns over ODWC and OWRB better collaborating for ODWC/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) comment on permits, although it would be difficult to draw a line on how OWRB incorporates the comments. OWRB must follow the established laws and policies.

Several additional comments were offered by individual participants as follows:

- The state needs to implement strategies that improve groundwater recharge.
- The state should issue a moratorium on new well drilling during periods of aquifer decline.
- The state should not allow the diversion of water from a stream or river that is then sold for fracking.
- Surface water permits should have seasonal limitations to account for variations in monthly streamflow.
- The hearing process for contested permits should be changed to allow for an unbiased, third-party expert witness to the hearings that would review and comment on the scientific information presented to the court.
- The state would benefit from a reuse and water conservation program or initiative, to assure proper treatment of water once it is used and efficient use.
- Appointed boards and commissioners should have balanced representation to assure that diverse interests are represented, such as environmentalists, industry, business and economic developers, landowners, etc.
- Rural water district contractor bidding processes need oversight, accountability, and transparency to assure fair pricing and right-sized solutions.

- Some participants expressed concerns over the Grand River Dam Authority (GRDA) and how they manage water. The recommendation was for the legislature to review their domain and authority.
- One participant was concerned with the lack of education on existing, new, or upcoming regulations for rural water suppliers. The suggestion is that OWRB establish a program of training and education, with circuit riders that have knowledge and authority.

## 2.4.2 Funding / Financing

Generally, the participants in the Funding/Financing breakout groups across the state expressed concerns over increasing costs of water infrastructure, operations, and maintenance, and the need for establishing ongoing state funding to support water infrastructure, education, technical assistance, and other items.

Across the state, there was consensus regarding the need to develop a **more robust system management** possibly by providing training to utility board members focused specifically on the business side of a utility. There are certainly well managed, even award-winning treatment plants across our state; however, for many communities recruiting local experienced business leaders to serve on boards or run the business end of the utility can be very difficult. A utility is a business that must be run like a business to properly maintain the millions of dollars of infrastructure, pay its employees enough to attract and retain talent, respond to customers, plan for future needs, set rates, anticipate future regulatory hurdles, etc. Participants discussed options for providing training, such as expanding and improving existing programs rather than creating new programs. Such training has the potential to make systems less reliant on future grants and provide better water for Oklahomans.

Many participants discussed the need to **expand planning and technical assistance programs**. Oklahoma Rural Water Association, Oklahoma Strategic Alliance (OSA), Oklahoma Municipal Assurance Group (OMAG), Chickasaw Nation, Choctaw Nation, Cherokee Nation, and others offer planning and technical assistance programs to water systems. These are frequently available for free or at low cost, but often are limited based on funding and staffing. Current programs offer assistance for water audits, leak detection, and individualized technical advice, but participants identified that it would be good to expand existing offerings and include planning (local and regional) as well as oversight to aid utilities, when needed, with reviewing technical deliverables by others. Expanding the subjects and curriculums of these programs and funding to support additional trainers would help address the large demand for these services across our state.

Across the state, there was consensus that **permanent state funding for water and wastewater is needed**. A few ideas on how to administer this funding included:

- Utilize existing programs to administer additional funds in lieu of creating new programs.
- Expand role of OSA to prioritize use of additional funds.
- Provide state matching funds with appropriate oversight and requirement to implement best management practices (like sustainable planning, minimizing water loss, water rate structures, etc.).
  - Consider an approach that provides more state match funding as more best practices are implemented.
  - Consider how to prioritize funding for systems of different sizes and with different needs (e.g., resolving existing violations versus improvements needed to avoid future violations).
- Provide funding to recruit and retain water industry workers including outreach to schools, conducting training, etc.

Several additional comments were offered by individual participants as follows:

- The state should do a better job of informing its citizens about the true cost of water. Use the phrase "we cannot raise water rates" as an opportunity to educate board members, customers, and the public about the true cost of water.
- All systems in Oklahoma should pass an automatic rate increase set at regular intervals (e.g., biannually) to adjust for inflation and other needs as identified.
- Property tax is not available to be used for water infrastructure and hence another reason that finding ways to pay for water infrastructure is so challenging.
- 30-year sales tax increases are a common way to help fund a loan but can create even bigger challenges for local businesses to compete and stay solvent. Often additional loans (and hence additional increases to local sales tax) are taken out *before* the initial loan is paid.
- For very small communities, some of the few entities in town are tax exempt entities, such as the post office, co-ops, and churches, and thus sales tax revenues may be stretched too thin to use for loans.
- Many small systems have only a few hundred taps for revenue, and yet to appropriately address their problems. will require millions of dollars. This is an extremely challenging ask for their ratepayers.
- Increasing rates on ratepayers can be politically challenging.
- Workforce in water/wastewater treatment is an enormous challenge as young individuals move to larger communities and higher pay with far less responsibility are easy to find. *Example: Two communities mentioned upgrading starting pay from \$11-\$12/hour to \$16/hour resulting in far better retention and job satisfaction.*
- Consider developing a better way to identify "disadvantaged" communities. For example, participants expressed concern that they felt there were communities that should qualify as a disadvantaged community, but it does not because a handful of wealthy households throw off the current identification calculations.
- Provide additional educational materials that describe existing funding opportunities, programs, eligibility, requirements, etc. to make the process of identifying funding opportunities easier for communities, especially those small and very small utilities. One example would be identifying federal funding and/or matching opportunities.

### 2.4.3 Collaboration/Partnership

The participants in the collaboration/partnership breakout group focused on: regional water planning, regionalization, and BMPs for water systems and uses. Participants noted that broader education regarding the benefits of collaboration and partnership is needed. The fact sheet that was used to support this breakout group's discussion could be a foundation or starting point for those efforts.

Many participants expressed **support for developing regional water plans**, and for the role they can play in consolidating and coordinating local plans within a region. Participants also noted that regional water planning and regionalization can work together in many ways to meet local water demands more efficiently, or at a shared/reduced cost or could not have been met. Regional plans can provide a roadmap for local leaders and help individual water providers and water users share resources, challenges, and goals. They were also viewed as a potential avenue for supporting and developing the statewide OCWP, including coordination of planning efforts and supply sources between different regions across the state. Participants noted that it is important to determine how best to coordinate tribal nations' water planning efforts with regional water planning.

However, regional plans will be most effective in these roles if they are more consistently developed to include a defined list of minimum requirements for contents and outputs, and if every area of the state is included in a regional plan. Other states (e.g., Texas, Colorado) have had success by specifying the content of regional plans, providing state funding support for regional planning, and synthesizing information from regional plans into the statewide plan. Oklahoma's existing approach of self-initiated, self-organized, and self-funded regional plans accomplish portions of these objectives.

Participants noted that regional water plans can be useful tools in identifying capital project needs for water supply, and that *the state could help incentivize regional planning through financial support for regional plan development and by either requiring or providing bonus points for inclusion of a capital project in a regional water plan* as a condition for approving or prioritizing state funding for water projects. They also noted that public supply systems that do not have diversified supply sources would more strongly benefit from regionalization/regional planning efforts than those that do have diversified supply sources.

Participants noted that these groups can also provide emergency support services to each other both in terms of possibly providing emergency equipment or personnel, possibly through expanding the existing [SOONERWARN](#) program, Oklahoma's Water/Wastewater Agency Response Network.

Each of the collaboration/partnership breakout groups discussed *regionalization* and the different ways that term can be defined. While it is common to think of regionalization in terms of consolidation or management takeovers of individual water systems, this can have negative connotations regarding loss of system identity and loss of local control. However, case studies were discussed of successful outcomes of system consolidation, and participants suggested that the state and the OCWP can help support information sharing regarding the potential benefits of consolidation.

Regionalization can also consist of sharing water supply sources, equipment, operations staff, and/or infrastructure. It can also include system interconnections to bolster reliability and resilience to a wide range of water supply system interruptions. Several examples were cited from across Oklahoma and other states of where this type of regionalization led to operational benefits, cost-effective water service, and water system reliability.

Regionalization is founded on trust between partners, and some participants noted that it is important to establish trust prior to partnering on regionalization projects. The state could support trust-building through convening water users within a region, supporting regional water planning efforts, and by assigning staff to one or more regions to help look for potential regional partnerships and specific regionalization opportunities and benefits.

In each regional meeting, collaboration/partnership breakout group participants were asked to identify the types of voluntary BMPs that should be encouraged for water users across the state, and ideas for how the state could encourage or incentivize those BMPs without issuing mandates.

**Voluntary BMPs** identified by participants include:

- Implement effective utility management and sustainable utilities practices.
- Develop a conservation plan for each public supply system.
- Develop a drought management plan for each public supply system.
- Leak detection/water loss prevention programs.
- Partnerships to share staff under challenging or emergency circumstances.
- Increase system knowledge retention through infrastructure mapping efforts; avoid duplication of efforts on a given system, which could allow more systems to be mapped.
- Develop flood maps beyond the minimum requirements and inform those who are at risk, even in low-risk areas.

- Integrate business practices/teaching into board member training.
- Avoidance of dead-end distribution lines and coordination of municipal system flushing.
- Tiered water rates.
- Enforcement of permit limits.

Mechanisms through which the state can *encourage or incentivize these BMPs* that were identified by participants include:

- Support training and rollout of effective utility management/sustainable utility practices at the regional and local level.
- Communicate success stories associated with these BMPs including a description of benefits achieved.
- Link state funding programs to BMPs, e.g., provide financial incentives and support for developing conservation plans and drought plans, and bonus points for state funding of actions or projects that are included in conservation and drought plans.
- Develop "How To" guides or templates for key BMPs that are tailored to Oklahoma; provide regional technical support staff to guide local/regional adoption of the BMPs.
- Incentivize staying in compliance. For example, many funding programs provide additional prioritization points to systems with consent orders and/or notices of violations. It is important for these systems to come back into compliance, and it is important to help systems reliably stay in compliance. Look for ways to achieve both goals.
- Develop statewide codes for efficient water fixtures.
- Provide encouragement and guidance for rate structures that can fund conservation rebate programs.
- Raise revenue via a surcharge for urban landscape irrigation systems.
- Provide public education to promote/incentivize water-wise landscaping.
- Develop tax incentives for use of new technologies and help fund the development of new technologies.
- Address the "use it or lose it" concern with metering.
- Conduct site-specific impact studies for new uses of aquifers.

## 2.5 Look Ahead

Owen Mills thanked participants for their participation in the regional meetings. Over the coming year, the OCWP team will follow up on the discussion items, explore other priority topics, present data and findings from technical studies, and discuss recommendations to include in the OCWP. Reach out to Owen with any questions or to discuss the OCWP.



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## COLLABORATION / PARTNERSHIP

### 1. Regional water planning.

- How might shared collaborative planning improve your water supply future?
- If industry, towns, farmers, tribes, RWDs, that depend on a common water source(s) collectively planned, lobbied, sought grants, and shared resources for water needs, how might their water future improve?
- How can state-level and regional-level planning support each other?

### 2. Regionalization.

- How might shared collaborative use of common supply sources or conveyance/treatment infrastructure improve your water supply future?
- Would additional interconnections between public water supply systems be effective? Practical?
- What are the risks or downsides of collaborative planning and additional interconnections? How do we overcome or address these challenges?
- How might the state support regionalization? For example, meeting facilitation, technical assistance, funding, etc.

### 3. Encouraging best water management practices (BMPs).

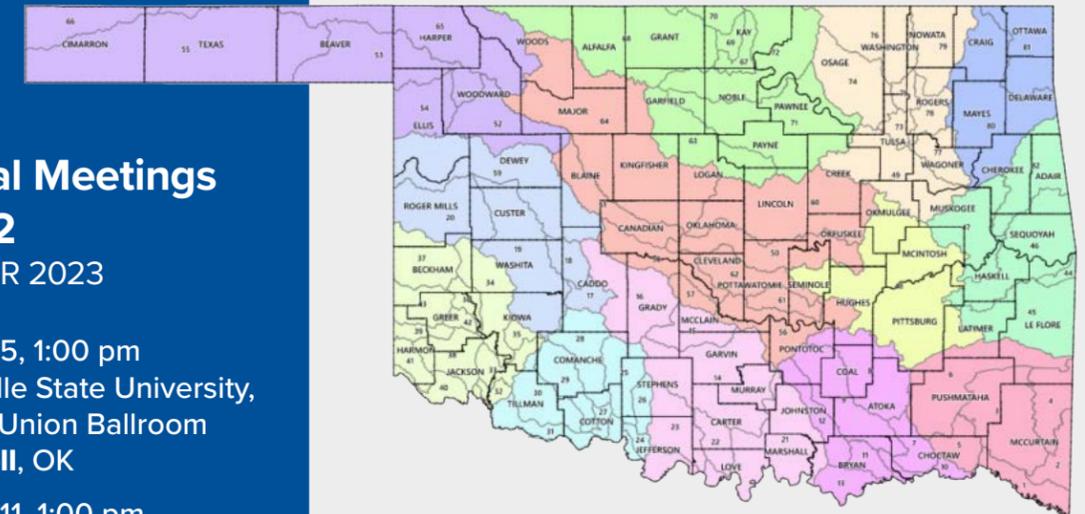
- What water management practices should be encouraged?
- What types of water uses should be prioritized – if any?
- What types of incentives would be most effective?
- What would be ineffective?

### 4. Water Management Districts and/or Irrigation Districts.

- What can be gained or lost through a local water cooperative and local control?
- What if towns, industries, producers, and others managed water together?
- How could local management be paid for and managed?

### 5. General discussion.

- How would these changes and ideas be implemented?
- What are the key challenges with implementing these ideas, and how could we address them?
- Who would take the lead on proposing and implementing these ideas?



## Regional Meetings Round 2 DECEMBER 2023

December 5, 1:00 pm

- Panhandle State University,  
Student Union Ballroom  
**Goodwell, OK**

December 11, 1:00 pm

- Cameron University,  
McMahon Centennial  
Complex, McAsland Ballroom  
**Lawton, OK**

December 12, 1:00 pm

- Kiamichi Technology Center,  
Conference Room A/B  
**Talihina, OK**

December 13, 1:00 pm

- Chota Center  
**Tahlequah, OK**

December 14, 1:00 pm

- Francis Tuttle Technology  
Center - Portland Campus  
**Oklahoma City, OK**

December 14, 9:00 am

- Virtual 9:00 am – 11:00 am

## Breakout Session Topics

➤ Funding / Financing

➤ Permitting / Regulations / Policy

➤ Collaboration / Partnership



OCWP Regional Meeting 2  
Breakout Session Feedback Form



## FUNDING / FINANCING

### 1. Changes to existing funding/financing programs.

- a. Which programs are you familiar with or have you used?
- b. Why did you use (or choose not to use) these programs?
- c. What worked well?
- d. What could be improved?
- e. What “gaps” are there in existing state and federal programs? Is it a dollar gap (insufficient funds to meet needs), a gap in eligible entities, a gap in eligible project types, or something else?

### 2. Ideas for new funding/financing programs.

- a. Is a new funding/financing program needed or does it make more sense to expand/modify existing programs?
- b. Should a funding program require or incentivize best water management practices? e.g., certain “effective utility management” practices like having an approved water conservation plan or drought response plan?
- c. Frequently more priority points are awarded to entities that have permit violations (to help bring them back into compliance). Should we consider switching the narrative to balancing how priority points are given (for example, points given to entities that are proactively addressing projects prior to having permit violations)?
- d. Should we consider a state-local match program? If so, what is the minimum state match that would be needed to incentivize use of best water management practices? For example, in some states and depending on the type of project, the state matches between 10-75% for water related projects.
- e. Should any cost-share program (were it to be enacted) be contingent on a cost/benefit analysis to determine if a project warrants funding?

### 3. General discussion.

- a. How would these changes and ideas be implemented?
- b. What are the key challenges with implementing these ideas, and how could we address them?
- c. Who would take the lead on proposing and implementing these ideas?



## PERMITTING / REGULATIONS / POLICY

### 1. Change in permitting & spacing rules.

- a. Should there be a setback/buffer from your neighbors’ property lines?
- b. Should groundwater be able to be used on land that is noncontiguous to the dedicated land that it was withdrawn from?
- c. Should groundwater metering be mandated and enforced? If so, how should it be implemented?
- d. Should surface water metering be mandated and enforced? If so, how should it be implemented?

### 2. Enhanced enforcement of existing rules.

- a. What policies or rules require more enforcement?
- b. What does more enforcement look like?
- c. Would local management make more sense?
- d. Should it vary by region?
- e. Can you manage what you don’t measure? If so, how?

### 3. Water Management Districts and/or Irrigation Districts.

- a. What can be gained or lost through a local water cooperative and local control?
- b. What if towns, industries, producers, and others managed water together?
- c. How could local management be paid for and managed?

### 4. General discussion.

- a. How would these changes and ideas be implemented?
- b. What are the key challenges with implementing these ideas, and how could we address them?
- c. Who would take the lead on proposing and implementing these ideas?

## BREAKOUT TOPIC: COLLABORATION / PARTNERSHIP

Of the almost 900 community water systems (defined as those that each serve at least 15 service connections used by year-round residents or regularly serve 25 year-round residents), approximately 750 are classified as small systems (defined as those serving 3,300 persons or fewer). Many of these systems have declining populations, aging or inadequate infrastructure, impacted water sources, difficulty meeting water quality standards, and/or declining revenues, which challenge the delivery of safe and dependable drinking water.



### REGIONALIZATION

**Regionalization** refers to the merging or alliance of two or more water systems, either through structural or nonstructural measures or a combination of both, to improve planning, operation, and management of the systems (EPA 1983).

Nonstructural regionalization options are generally administrative or managerial arrangements that allow the participating water suppliers to maintain identify and independence. System interconnections or shared infrastructure are examples of nonstructural regionalization strategies.

Structural regionalization includes options that result in the creation of a new water supply entity or a shift in control of policy and functions from one or more water providers to another, whether existing or new.



### POTENTIAL BENEFITS

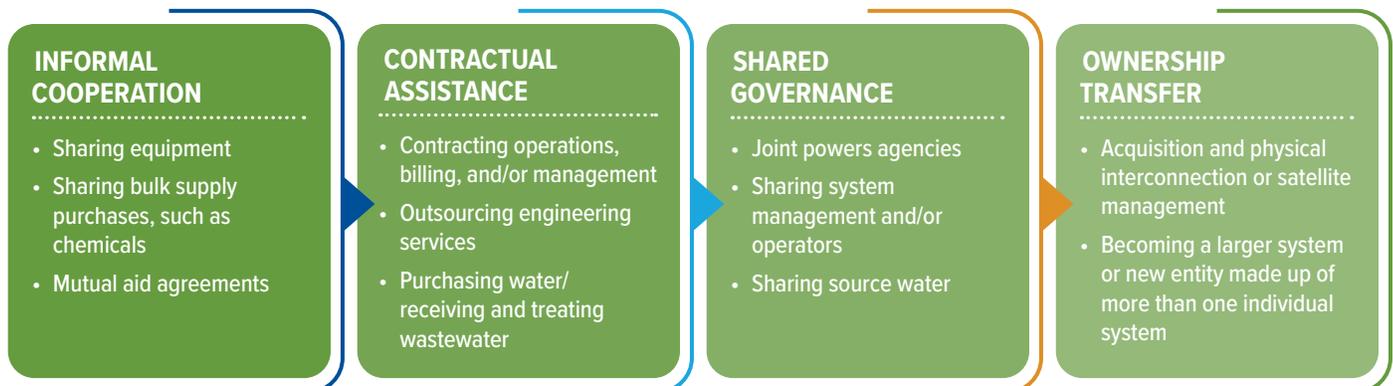
- » Ability to finance large water projects through shared commitment and a larger ratepayer base
- » Increased water supply reliability via accessing multiple water sources
- » Increased drought resilience through shared shortages and diversification of supplies
- » Access to alternate supplies during a short-term water disruption or emergency in the primary supply(ies)
- » Reduced costs for ratepayers through economies of scale, shared operation and maintenance costs of regional facilities
- » Strengthened maintenance crews, better knowledge pool and more capacity to cover shifts and respond to emergencies



### POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

- » Technical feasibility of connections between distribution systems
- » Costs of developing interconnections and treatment facilities
- » Sharing control over supply and/or treatment
- » Developing and operating under intergovernmental agreements
- » Mixing of dissimilar waters (e.g., groundwater and surface water or different water quality) may cause adverse impacts in the distribution system

## Increasing Transfer of Responsibility

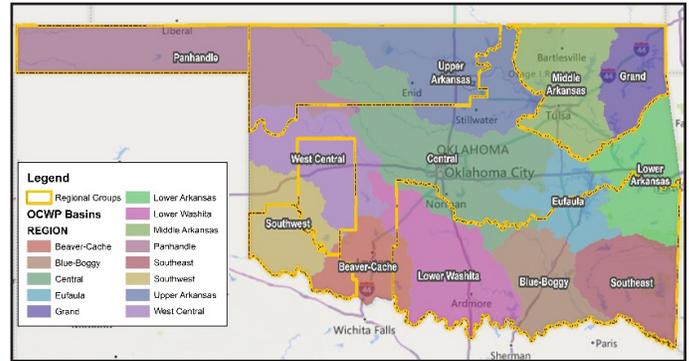




## REGIONAL PLANNING

**Regional planning** refers to groups representing a variety of interests that work together to develop a regional water plan. The 2012 OCWP recommended forming 13 Regional Planning Groups that would be **non-regulatory** and consist of local stakeholders from all water sectors and appropriate agency representatives. The groups would be charged with developing regional water plans in a manner consistent with minimum requirements set by OWRB, in support of the OCWP and its implementation priorities. Such plans would include the identification of projects that are synergistic (better than the sum of multiple single system projects) designed to address the unique needs and issues identified by Regional Planning Group participants.

Since the 2012 OCWP, several grassroots water planning groups have been organized across Oklahoma (Arbuckle-Simpson, Consortium of Master Conservancy Groups, Central Oklahoma Water Resource Authority, Northwest Action, Panhandle, Tulsa Regional, Southwest Water Action).



Some of the most effective regional plans in other states are those that complement (and/or are a component of) state-level planning. Effective regional plans have consistent goals and methods, defined expectations and deliverables, and geographic coverage of 100 percent of the state's area. Regional-level planning could be conducted statewide starting in the late 2020s, with the resulting regional plans supporting and informing development of the next OCWP update that will follow the 2025 OCWP.

	Low level of engagement	Moderate level of engagement	High level of engagement
	STATE LED APPROACH	HYBRID APPROACH	LOCAL LED APPROACH
Population	State determines baseline and growth projections.	State suggests baseline and growth projections and individual utilities are surveyed and can adjust within parameters. Local studies can be used.	Local utilities provide baseline and projections. Where not provided, the State uses a process to develop projections.
Demand	State determines demand based on per capita projections.	State suggests demand based on per capita projections and individual utilities are surveyed and can adjust within parameters. Local studies can be used.	Local utilities provide demands based on their per capita projections. Where not provided, the State uses a process to develop projections.
Supplies	State determines a single metric or range for calculating/modeling supplies (water right availability, average annual yield, firm yield, safe yield etc). Limited by infrastructure constraints or water quality.	State suggests a metric or range for calculating/modeling supplies, but local utilities can request a variance to develop a modified approach. Local studies can be used.	Local utilities determine supply based on local water rights, capacity constraints or local studies. Modeling of supplies may have been conducted in local studies. Where not provided, the State uses a process to develop availability.
Needs	State defines needs.	State defines needs, but a local utility can add a safety factor or buffer. Local studies can be used.	Local utilities determine needs based on local experience.
Strategies	State identifies strategies and cost or a suite of strategies to be implemented based on the supply available and need.	State recommends a suite of strategies or cost which local utilities can select from or supplement. Local studies can be used but cost estimates should conform to a standard.	Local utilities provide list of strategies and cost. Local studies can be used.
Scale	Can be completed at the State, Basin, or County level.	Can be completed at the Basin, County or Local level and rolled up to the State level.	Can be completed at the Local level; while outputs can be rolled up to Basin or State levels, results from different areas are not comparable since they were developed with inconsistent methods.